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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF PLANNING IN THE UNIVERSITY *

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ABSTRACT

Societal norms and values have changed so drastically during the last decade that educational institutions are being forced to respond and react to intense pressures both from inside and outside their own organizational structure. A forward looking institutional planning function requires that organizational forms and modes be arranged to anticipate and benefit from these often conflicting pressures and changes. This paper utilizes a conceptual planning model to critically examine the management of these conflicts relative to the planning process in the university.

Universities and other institutions of higher education are being pressured to change both by their internal constituencies, the faculty and students, and by their external publics, alumni, parents, manpower users, and the local, state, and federal governments. It seems inevitable that most institutions will have to respond to these pressures to some degree if they are to retain their viability and autonomy throughout the next few decades. In order to anticipate and benefit from these often conflicting pressures and changes the institutional planning function must become more future-oriented.

In the last few years, institutions have moved away from their traditional closed system toward a more open system mode of operation. The maintenance of the components of the educational open system in a viable state will require extraordinary administrative skill and leadership. The dynamism and change inherent in the open system will result in a substantial re-distribution of power within the system and thus increase the level of conflict. The challenge for university administrators will be the provision of effective management of that conflict so that the overall institutional power base is not diminished.

What is Conflict?

Coser (1956) defined social conflict as "struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals." Thus conflict arises when people or groups of people have differences with respect to objectives, approach, attitudes, interest, etc.

American sociologists in the pre-World War II years considered conflict to be a fundamental and constructive part of social organization, and the negative or dysfunctional aspects of conflict to be merely indicative of the need for social change and structural reform. On the other hand, Maslow (1965) noted that our society in general is afraid of conflict, disagreement, hostility, antagonism, and enmity so that conflict has been viewed as something which must be avoided by all civilized persons.

In more recent years, the behavioralists, while recognizing that conflict is an inherent part of all interpersonal and organizational relationships, have directed their attention toward research into methods for the effective resolution of that conflict. It is only in the last five years that the underlying negative philosophies of the behavioralists have been questioned. Robbins (1974), in particular, advocates a more positive approach to conflict. His interactionist philosophy states that conflict is a necessary component of the effective operation of any organization or system, and that if absent or present at very low levels it should be stimulated. Thus conflict is valued for its positive effects although it is recognized that conflict must be controlled lest it become dysfunctional and hinder or even disrupt the effective functioning of the system.

Conflict within a university may produce beneficial results if managed properly. Changes will often stimulate conflict but this conflict may in turn stimulate changes which will improve the situation and cause a spontaneous decrease in conflict level. Thus the reorganization of a school will stimulate conflict as new organizational patterns evolve. The struggle to achieve a sense of order may lead to the establishment of new management systems, development of sets of rules and procedures, etc., which will confer a measure of stability on the new structure. Conflict, therefore may stimulate creativity as members of a unit struggle to survive and adjust to a new situation. As members struggle together against an external threat, then the spirit of collegiality increases and the group as a whole becomes more cohesive and more able to handle its power.

Interactionists believe, therefore, that the absence of conflict in an organization almost inevitably indicates stagnation. At times, it may be necessary to stimulate conflict to revitalize the system. Thus the management of conflict, by stimulation or resolution, will be an essential activity in dealing with the problems and sets of problems encountered in systems in the future. The process of dealing with sets or systems of problems in an attempt to reach

a desired state of affairs is called planning (Ackhoff,1974,p.21). Thus conflict management will become an increasingly important part of comprehensive planning.

The Management of Conflict

The administrator or manager who wishes to plan effectively must be cognizant of the potential sources of conflict. With this knowledge he can perceptively scan his organization and its environment and gauge the conflict level in various areas. The conflict may then be stimulated or resolved so as to maximize the outcomes for the organization.

Robbins (1974,p.29) has identified three main sources of conflict: inadequate communication within the organization, poor organizational structure, and the diversity of personal and behavioral factors of organization members. These three sources are very interrelated and conflict situations usually involve elements from all three. For example, as a general rule the larger the organization, the greater the likelihood of the existence of conflict at any given time; size is thus the structural source of conflict but that in turn affects the adequacy of the communication network and the probability of a divergence of value systems present in the members of the organization. Manipulation of these sources of potential conflict enables conflict to be generated if required.

An administrator must also be knowledgeable about the effective methods of resolving conflict so that it is not allowed to escalate to a dysfunctional level. How can conflict be resolved? (Blake 1964, Burke 1969, Robbins 1974, Chaps. 7 & 8)

(i) Avoidance and smoothing - differences are not confronted but instead are ignored. This may be a reasonable approach on a short term basis in highly emotional situations.

(ii) Compromising or bargaining - results in a decision which is sub-optimal for all involved. There is a risk that the conflicting parties will deadlock and conflict will increase further.

(iii) Authoritarianism - the use of formal authority may reduce the level of overt conflict but it may simply become covert.

(iv) Inducing behavioral changes - a slow and costly process which attempts

to alter the behavior of individuals through education as part of an organizational development process.

(v) Changing the structure of the organization - a variety of methods may be used to place a buffer between the conflicting units. Alternatively a small unit may be coopted into a larger unit.

(vi) Problem solving - a rational confrontation approach resulting in open exchange between conflicting parties often in the presence of a mediator.

(vii) Superordinate goals - shared goals are established which require mutual cooperation of conflicting units.

The first three methods of conflict resolution can reduce the levels of conflict to varying extents, but they fail to address the underlying sources of conflict directly and their effect is usually temporary. The last four methods, on the other hand, are more direct and usually have a more long-lasting effect. Burke's research (1969) in this area indicated that problem-solving or confrontation is probably overall the most effective means of conflict resolution, irrespective of the cause of the conflict.

At the current time more than 200 institutions of higher education utilize collectively bargained agreements to handle conflicts over faculty welfare issues such as tenure, salary, work load, etc. In the face of increasing unrest and shifting of traditional value systems in academe, faculty have turned to bargaining agents in an attempt to establish new norms and definitions of working conditions. Under collective bargaining, formalized grievance procedures and due process are available to handle conflicts. However, the only items which may be handled in this way are specifically spelled out in the agreement and therefore the less formal methods of handling conflict listed above must be used to deal with problems in other areas.

Conditions Generating Conflict in Academe

Recent papers by Glenny (1975), Kerr (1973) and Bennis (1975) have reviewed

and discussed the internal and external pressures which are generating conflict in educational institutions today. These pressures include changing patterns of funding at the local, state and federal levels; changing public attitudes toward higher education; generally declining student enrollments; fluctuating job markets; calls for increased institutional accountability to funding agents, students and the general public; high percentage of tenured faculty. All three authors believe that the key to institutional survival during the next two decades will be the emergence of new administrative styles to deal effectively with the inevitable conflicts that will arise.

There is clearly a need for those who occupy leadership positions to focus their attention on the institution-environment interface to plan and develop new, creative, entrepreneurial ways for the institution to respond to and impact upon its environment. In other words, the institutions must change to function as open loop systems while still maintaining sufficient internal stability for faculty to continue their teaching, research and scholarly activities. Community colleges have always been responsive to the needs of the public they serve, while large research universities have traditionally remained somewhat aloof. Thus, the changes and conflict occurring in institutions of higher education during the next few decades will be felt most keenly in the large research universities.

Managing the University in a Turbulent Environment

During the 20th century, there has been general increase in the power of the faculty in institutions of higher education and a corresponding decrease in central control. Trustees have delegated the majority of their authority to the central administration, the faculty, and to a lesser extent, the students. In turn, the central administration has, to a large degree, espoused the collegial model of university governance and favored widespread faculty and student participation in decision making. Faculty have been given this power because it is presumed that their technical and professional expertise will enable them to play

a vital role in the decision-making process. Arendt's view of the faculty stands in sharp contrast. She believes that the intellectual and scientific communities "cling with greater tenacity to categories of the past that prevent them from understanding the present and their own role in it" (Arendt,1969,p.73), they also "lack experience in all matters pertaining to power" (Arendt, 1969,p.73).

The diffuseness and ambiguity of power resulting from this wholesale delegation has led organizational theorists Cohen and March (1974) to characterize the university as an "organized anarchy" in which decision-making can best be described using the "garbage-can" theory. This type of participative management, although favored by many faculty and administrators, has very often seemed to lead to "the rule of Nobody"; everyone is involved in decisions and, therefore, no one person will admit his responsibility. Those who wish to complain cannot localize the responsibility and conflict is resolved by avoidance. This situation leads to frustration of the faculty, students and general public and is, in part, the cause of increased faculty interest in collective bargaining. As Hobbs (1974) has noted, the participative mode of management in universities is often punctuated by unpredictable eruptions and is analogous to the operation of a defective pressure cooker.

The collegial model of university governance is functional only when the university is functioning as a relatively closed system with abundant financial resources. The more recent models of governance, Baldridge's political model (1971) and Cohen and March's organized anarchy model (1974), are essentially descriptive models and are of limited use to an administrator seeking to effectively manage a university in the mid-1970's. As pointed out by Richman and Farmer (1974,Chap. 1), the problems faced by a university attempting to adapt actively to a turbulent, dynamic environment are not unlike those faced by the industrial sector. Corporate management has been struggling to find solutions for several years, while university administrators are, in most cases, just beginning to realize the extent of the problems.

A Conceptual Planning Model

Some research has been carried out on conflict management in the industrial sector but very little has been written on this subject relative to higher education. This paper utilizes Weisbord's (1975) management model to critically examine conflict management relative to the planning process in the university. Weisbord's model delineates five main sub-divisions of managerial work:

(1) statement of the mission and goals of the unit managed;

(2) design of an appropriate organizational structure;

(3) design of a reward system based on the goal system;

(4) use of available technologies to help the unit meet its goals;

(5) building of good interpersonal relationships with subordinates, peers and superiors.

All sub-divisions are interrelated and interdependent. They are affected by and interact with the external environment both individually and collectively. The manager occupies a central position in the model and must monitor and evaluate the information he receives relative to each of these interactions. On the basis of these inputs he can act to modify the situation in each of the subdivisions. Thus overall the unit remains flexible and responsive to changing conditions internal and external environment.

This type of approach stresses the role of the manager as the change agent; the person who is responsible for creating and maintaining an organizational climate that encourages faculty development and ensures continued effectiveness of unit in the face of changing conditions. The notion of the manager as a change agent is relatively new in the industrial sector (Luke 1975) where the more usual approach has been to bring organization development specialists into the organization on a temporary basis to initiate and facilitate change. In academic institutions, senior faculty, whether administrators or not, have traditionally been expected to assist junior faculty in their professional development. This development however, has been expected to follow along traditional

pathways and not deviate from the old-established norms. Considerable conflict has arisen as older faculty concerned with maintaining the intellectual purity of their disciplines have attempted to pressure younger faculty to abandon their interdisciplinary interests. Thus in the academic department, change has been actively resisted by those in the most senior positions.

Conflict management from the viewpoint of Weisbord's model (1975) is categorized as a key part of the sub-division dealing with interpersonal relationships. Therefore, this paper will consider the initial goal-setting process and its interactions with the other sub-divisions, and with the external environment, as well as the overall role of the manager in the stimulation or resolution of conflict with respect to this process.

Statement of Mission and Goals

It is of prime importance that all universities have a clear sense of mission and a set of well defined goals which are consistent with the available resources and prevailing environmental conditions. Many faculty and administrators are of the opinion that it is impossible to state explicit operational goals for a university (Cohen and March 1974, Ikenberry 1972); and feel that since goals cannot be set in any meaningful way, it is impossible to monitor and evaluate the progress of a university toward achieving these goals. The lack of a clearcut goal system plus the over-reliance on the collegial mode of governance has led to a very haphazard decision-making in universities. The top administrators have often tended to make what Barnard (1938) terms negative decisions, or decisions not to decide. Once a set of goals is established for an institution, it then becomes essential that administrators make positive decisions, i.e., decisions to do something or not to do something. Positive decision-making, however, stimulates conflict and administrators must be prepared to control and manipulate the conflict to maintain the optimal level.

Several studies have been made of the goal systems of universities during the last few years (Cohen and March 1974, Baldridge 1971, Grambsch 1974) and Richmond and Farmer (1974) have reviewed and summarized the results obtained.

They believe that the goal pursued with the greatest vigor in all types of institutions of higher education as evidenced by budgetary expenditures is that of protecting the faculty, i.e., the tenure, prestige, job security and academic freedom of the faculty. Other goals which are highly ranked at state multiversities and high prestige private schools are research and graduate education; undergraduate education ranks eighth and tenth in priority, respectively, at these institutions.

The goals established internally by faculty and administrators of large research universities are often at odds with the ideas and wishes of the major supporters of the university. The major supporters are the state government, federal government, professional accrediting agencies, parents and alumni and manpower users. Each of these groups has its own set of preferred goals for the university (Richman and Farmer 1974); for instance, both parents and alumni and the state government rate jobs for graduates, cultural assimilation and undergraduate education as the three highest priority goals which should be pursued by the university. None of these goals are among the top three actually pursued by the university. As long as money was plentiful goal diversity and incongruence could be accomodated within the organization; the slack was high and provided adequate buffering between conflicting units and the external publics. Thus, for quite a number of years, the tactic adopted by university personnel dealing with the conflict generated by goal incompatiblities, has been that of smoothing. It seems unlikely that this will suffice for much longer. A clear set of goals, showing more responsiveness to external pressures, must be defined by the university community. The task for administrators then becomes one of internal change initiation.

Initiation of Change

How can a large university go about the task of setting goals which are responsive to both internal and external needs? Faculty have a set of professional norms and values which are difficult to change, and in a large university

the backgrounds and interests of faculty are almost as varied as those of the students they serve. When this heterogeneous group engages in "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources" (Coser,1956) the conflict generated may rapidly become dysfunctional. In view of the fact that there are few jobs available in academia today, it is unlikely that faculty will choose to leave the university. Faculty are essentially locked in, unable or afraid to exit; those who are tenured will, therefore, begin to exercise their voice option, intensifying conflict even further. If this conflict is avoided, ignored, or smoothed there will be little faculty loyalty or commitment to the goals and therefore little chance of moving toward realization of those goals.

It is commonly accepted that planning cannot be meaningful unless the top administration is strongly supported and committed to the venture. At the same time there must be participative decision-making concerning goals involving the lowest levels in the hierarchy. Typically, academics have little knowledge about how to set realistic goals for a unit, and even less knowledge about how to mesh the unit goals within the framework of the overall university goals. Thus goal setting should be preceded by training sessions for departmental chairmen and deans. Top administrators should also be involved in these sessions. The sessions should cover not only the techniques of writing goals but also general aspects of organization theory focussing on ways in which the administrator should work to influence the attitudes of individuals and the climate of the unit, i.e., some efforts should be made to point out ways in which the human variable may be altered as a means of resolving or relieving the conflict that the goal-setting process will generate.

Ultimately, chairmen must persuade faculty that goal-setting at the departmental level is a desirable and necessary process. Higher level administrators, such as deans, must use their formal authority and reinforce their chairmen's stance. It would seem that the conflict stimulated by initiation of a goal-setting process can be maintained by the use of mild authoritarianism by superiors, while at the same time being controlled via a combination of resolution

techniques, such as problem solving and the establishment of superordinate goals. Problem solving or confrontation involves a frank discussion of problems and areas of disagreement by faculty and administrators. After a few sessions, the conflicting units or persons may agree to collaborate. If problem solving proves an effective means of controlling conflict, then it is likely that the conflicting parties will establish superordinate goals and thus a degree of mutual interdependency. Both problem solving and superordinate goal setting are very effective means of reducing conflict caused by ineffective communication or semantic problems; they are less effective methods in situations involving basic differences in values and personality factors. However, the very act of talking and working with one's adversary often lowers the conflict to acceptable levels.

The value of faculty and administrative commitment to superordinate goals has already been demonstrated in a number of private schools which have been struggling for survival. In these instances change has occurred rapidly and new goal systems have been instituted as traditional liberal arts colleges have revamped their curriculum to provide a career-oriented thrust. The primary superordinate goal has been to survive. In the face of perceived external threats to institutional survival, the academic community draws closer together and group cohesion increases. As a corollary, the group tolerates and may even welcome an increased degree of centralization of power. If goals are clearly stated and priorities set, then faculty are prepared to allow the top administrators to lead the institution through difficult times.

Practical Applications

How can this type of planning be carried out utilizing Weisbord's conceptual model (1975)? Consider for instance, a large university which establishes its three top priority goals for the next decade to be

(a) Improvement of undergraduate education programs

(b) Maintenance of funding level for research

(c) Increased attention to financial development activities

The fine details of the strategic planning needed for realization of these goals will vary widely depending on the current status of the institution with respect to each goal and the general environmental situation. Each goal should be studied relative to changes that will be needed with respect to organizational structure, technologies, the reward system and the interpersonal conflicts that these changes will generate. Procedures for dealing with the conflicts can then be built into the planning process.

The university, for instance, may have decided to work toward improving undergraduate education by increasing the amount of money devoted to faculty development in the teaching area. This may mean that a new organizational unit is needed to handle this work or that the existing one be reorganized. Since resources, status and power involved in faculty development are increasing in this instance the potential for conflict among those directly involved in the reorganization is very low. Resistance by other faculty may occur, but if the goals have been widely accepted on campus, this is not likely to become dysfunctional. New technologies may be utilized to improve teaching such as videotapes, television, computer-aided instruction -- the unfamiliar always generates anxieties to some extent. The way in which the reward or motivation system is set up will probably be a key factor in determining the extent to which the goal is realized. Traditionally the teaching of undergraduates has been a low status activity in universities, and unless the reward system is reoriented few faculty will see much point in redirecting their energies from high status research activities toward improving undergraduate activities. A perceived conflict between the goal and reward systems, such as this, will be dysfunctional.

A similiar type of analysis can be carried out for each goal. Thus if an institution wishes to maintain its present level of federally funded research, it must remain in step with the rapidly shifting research funding patterns. Structural and procedural mechanisms must be provided so that potential principal investigators can respond to RFP's on short notice; intra-university procedures must be streamlined so that the preparation of multi-disciplinary grant proposals

can be facilitated. Technology must be developed to rapidly disseminate information throughout the university community, and human technology (resources) must also undergo development in the area of grantsmanship. The reward system also must reflect the value that the university places on this type of activity. The rewards may be tangible, i.e., merit salary increases, or intangible, i.e., the facilitation of grant preparation and submission so that the faculty member can increase his own professional stature. Increased activity in the area of financial development may require that new, formal organizational units be set up or simply that an informal network involving faculty and administrators be established to get the work done. This is a relatively new area of involvement for faculty in many universities and as such will generate anxieties. These new expectations must be clearly tied in with the reward system again to legitimize these activities in the eyes of the university community.

After analysis of each individual goal, relative to the interdependant parts of Weisbord's model, the goal system in its entirety should be examined for potential conflict sources among the goals. This simple, but logical approach to planning should occur at the level of the departmental faculty meeting and on up through the hierarchical structure of the institution. It is quite clear that some administrators have instinctively always used an approach similar to the one suggested here; they have deliberately stimulated conflict and then channelled it into a productive change process for their units. More often, however, grandiose goals get formulated, strategies get plotted but important peripheral effects get ignored. This type of neglectful thinking has been a major cause of the loss of comity in American universities in recent years. A recent article by Fincher (1975) discussed the four "grand strategies of reform" being pursued by universities today in an effort to reestablish comity and regain consensus within the higher education community. He feels that these four strategies, the accountability theme, the alternative learning movement, planned change or organization development, and the interdisciplinary policy

sciences approach, are all failing to reunify and stabilize the higher education community. The planning model advocated in this paper, although not grandiose, does draw on key portions of each of the four reform strategies currently being used in universities now, and would seem to lend itself to development of a better integrated planning process.

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